

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 58 | Number 2 (Spring 1999)

pps. 217-219

Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters." *The Annals of Iowa* 58 (1999), 217-219.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10250>

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As the placement of workers in the fields became systematized, a system of labor recruitment also became important. Over time, labor contractors, growers, government workers, and agencies became employment officers; the Padrone system was born. Under that structure, government agencies and growers had the right to hire, fire, and control their workers in any manner they deemed fair. Hahamovitch's case study of Seabrook Farms in New Jersey portrays the concerns of growers, interaction with outside agitators, and conditions tolerated by workers. With this example, it is clear that workers had little or no bargaining power to secure better wages or living conditions. Growers exploited the laborers and used bias against their ability to perform satisfactorily to depress wages and hire scabs or imported workers. While progressive reformers, union leaders, and outside agitators sought reform in the early twentieth century, workers, for the most part, continued to live and work in substandard conditions. The failure to improve conditions for migrant laborers in the twentieth century can be blamed on agency infighting in Washington and a lack of understanding of the nature of agricultural piece work.

While the author has done a superb job of examining the institutional aspects of migrant labor, the voices of individuals from this admittedly underdocumented segment of the population are missing from her analysis. Still, Cindy Hahamovitch has presented a valuable study of eastern migrant labor during an important period of American agricultural history.

Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, by Melinda Chateauvert. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xiv, 267 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$46.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY NANCY GABIN, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

The story of the men who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), the first national trade union for African Americans and the most influential black labor union in the mid-twentieth century, is renowned in the annals of American labor and African American history. In *Marching Together*, Melinda Chateauvert tells the less familiar story of the women who also fought to organize the BSCP and its Ladies' Auxiliary. She examines not only the wives and female relatives of sleeping car porters but an even less visible group of women in the union—those who worked as Pullman maids, car cleaners, and porterettes. Parsing the sometimes conflicting, sometimes compatible, concerns about manhood, female respectability, class consciousness,

and citizenship, Chateauvert makes an important, original contribution to scholarship.

Organized in 1925, the BSCP included maids in its name until 1937, but it always stressed the goal of winning black manhood rights—that is, porters' rights—to better working conditions, a family wage, respect from fellow workers, and equal citizenship. The emphasis on the family wage created space for women in the union, but principally in their roles as wives. Women accepted their subordinate status but were far from passive. Initially organized in separate Women's Economic Councils to raise funds for the union, women did much more. Chateauvert details their diverse activities, including organizing porters, investigating racial discrimination in employment, housing, and consumer services, and making common cause with white and other black trade unionists. When the BSCP finally won recognition from the Pullman Company, porters' wives reorganized as the Ladies' Auxiliary. As their husbands had won manhood, so they had won respectability and the right to call themselves and be called ladies. The name change also sustained an expanded official role. No longer just a fund raising organization for the BSCP, the Ladies' Auxiliary now educated porters' wives about using union wages to make union homes. Their new-found respectability also gave them a fresh political voice that they deployed in legislative lobbying and civil disobedience.

The BSCP, however, dissolved the Ladies' Auxiliary in 1957. Chateauvert attributes the Auxiliary's demise to several factors, including the indifference and hostility of BSCP officers to women's activism. Men's persistent disregard for women extended to Pullman maids. Chateauvert describes the position of working women in the BSCP as "ambiguous"—they were few in number, regarded by some as deviant for seeking the "manhood" demanded by the union for the male majority, dismissed by most as temporarily employed, diverted into the Auxiliary, and lacking the support of Auxiliary members who stressed domesticity and male support of women.

Chateauvert demonstrates how race complicates our understanding of unionism and women's relationships to unions. Auxiliary women, after all, shared much with white women who also suffered from scant financial support and negative male attitudes even as they became politicized. Working women in other industries were similarly ignored or resented by union men. Race, however, created different dynamics, problems, and opportunities. Chateauvert deftly parses the contradictory pressures on African-American women to achieve respectability as women while fulfilling what some regarded as an unfeminine commitment to unionism. The women of the Ladies' Auxiliary,

moreover, took seriously their race consciousness, attending not just to their families but using the political voice that other black women still lacked to promote civil rights in the pre-*Brown* era.

Working with a fragmentary written record, Chateauvert has produced a substantial study. Greater attention to context would have enhanced the book. The Ladies' Auxiliary remained small, never numbering more than 1,500. It is not apparent how representative Auxiliary members were of African-American women or members of other union auxiliaries. Chateauvert indicates the important civic role of Auxiliary women, but it is not always clear how well integrated or well regarded they were in their communities. Nonetheless, *Marching Together* is an important work that highlights the significance of gender in the history of workers' movements and the prominence of organized labor in the history of the civil rights movement.

A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society, by Lawrence B. Glickman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. xi, 220 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JEFFREY KOLNICK, SOUTHWEST STATE UNIVERSITY

Lawrence Glickman has written a critically important book for all people concerned with the creation and interpretation of consumer culture. Whether in small-town Iowa or metropolitan Chicago, the lure of Nike shoes, a new sport utility vehicle, or a familiar fast-food franchise off the highway links Americans together in a complex web of consumption. Indeed, the way we consume shapes not only our identities as Americans but also our nation's foreign policy and the lives of countless workers in the global economy.

Understanding how consumer society was constructed and how the meaning of it was contested and changed over time is the purpose of Glickman's book. Looking back at the origins of consumerism (according to Glickman, an idea that began to take shape a little over a hundred years ago) provides us with long-forgotten models for understanding our own world. We come in contact with workers who sought to modify market forces for the human end of social justice in an industrial society. We encounter turn-of-the-century working-class consumers who clearly understood that bargain hunting at the retail end has consequences at the point of production. In this age of global capitalism, the working-class consumerism of a century ago, which linked consumption to production and sought to humanize the market, has important lessons for all of us.

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